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# Combining pro bono aid and community activism

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Lam Nguyen Ho has dreams of the Community Activism Law Alliance being more than just a legal clinic.

The executive director of the startup nonprofit envisions an effort that goes beyond legal-aid services, instead using the law to support and empower residents to have an impact on social justice issues.

“We’re connecting lawyers and activists and the law and activism and social movements,” he said. “But we’re also trying to push the boundaries and somewhat be legal crusaders ourselves, in terms of reaching people who are currently underserved.”

CALA opened its first legal clinic last month and is partnering with grassroots community organizations to open additional facilities in high-poverty areas on the city’s South and West sides.

Part of its mission is to reach underserved groups — such as undocumented immigrants, day laborers and sex workers — who are typically not reached by traditional legal-aid nonprofits and, in some cases, are ineligible for aid.

Along with the clinics, Ho said, the community activism lawyering model for CALA will connect attorneys to activists to collaborate on activities such as creating legal guides, conducting legal research, writing policy papers and, in some cases, supporting class-action lawsuits to help community groups achieve their goals.

Ho, 35, a Harvard Law School graduate who has spent his career in public interest law and worked for the Legal Assistance Foundation and Equip for Equality, said Chicago has a gap in neighborhood-based legal services. He’s found that only four out of Chicago’s 36 legal-aid groups have headquarters outside of the Loop.

CALA is working out of offices of existing community nonprofits, which provide work space, administrative support and translation services for



Lam Nguyen Ho

## On The Docket

The Community Activism Law Alliance is seeking donations and attorneys interested in volunteering for legal clinics. For more information, go to [calachicago.org](http://calachicago.org).

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two of the clinics. That reduces the group’s operations overhead, Ho said, and also brings the home base of legal services directly to low-income clients.

CALA’s three community partners are Enlace Chicago, which provides social services and does advocacy around community and economic development issues and anti-violence initiatives in the Little Village neighborhood; Immigrant Youth Justice League and Organized Communities Against Deportations, which advocate for undocumented immigrants; and the Sex Worker’s Outreach Project, a grassroots group that helps current and former sex workers, which includes adults who engage in consensual, legal and illegal activities that generate income.

Community partners were asked to envision the type of legal clinic and services their clients need, Ho said, and made the final decisions on eligibility criteria and practice areas.

“All of this is very collaborative and, in many ways, more community responsive,” he said.

The legal needs are different for each group.

Sex workers have some of the greatest unmet needs for legal services, Ho said, for issues involving domestic violence, housing and family law. But they’re also the least likely to go to an attorney because of the nature of their work.

Day laborers’ legal issues include wage-and-hour claims and dealing with inappropriate working conditions, while undocumented immigrant minors often need help applying for Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals relief, which grants temporary status allowing them to get a Social Security number and driver’s license.

“This is something that we have been wanting for years, it’s something the community needs,” said Jesus Palafox, an immigration organizer with Enlace. “People in the community have been asking for these services.”

### Need for lawyers and funding

Located on the city’s Southwest Side, Little Village has the highest concentration of undocumented immigrants in the state – an estimated 30,000 people, Palafox said. He said the majority of families also live in poverty, with about 95 percent of schoolchildren eligible for free or reduced lunch.

During week two of the Enlace legal clinic at 2756 S. Harding Ave., the small waiting room was filled to capacity an hour before it even opened.

Based on phone calls earlier in the day, Palafox estimated at least five more people would join the 10 clients already in line.

One of them, Olga Perez, said a friend came to the clinic the week before and told her about it. Although she is taking English classes, Perez said, she isn’t proficient yet and still needs to have a translator to access social services.

“I really appreciate that it’s here,” Perez said through a translator. “A lot of people need this service and they’re not aware of it.”

Before CALA, Palafox said, there was only one nonprofit in the neighborhood that offered legal referrals, but it usually required paying a fee.

Little Village has few attorneys, he said, so immigrants tend to go to notary publics first for help, because in Mexico, they often perform the work of attorneys. Palafox said many immigrants don’t realize they

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need a licensed attorney in the U.S. for legal representation.

While there is no shortage of clients, CALA has only two attorneys and needs pro bono lawyers and more funding to operate.

It is currently funded by a \$160,000 grant split over two years through the Harvard Law School Public Venture Fund, which provides alumni such as Ho with seed money to launch startup nonprofit ventures that serve the public interest.

CALA has also received a \$10,000 Flom Incubator Grant from the Skadden Fellowship Foundation for immigrant rights outreach and education programs in the suburbs.

With help from the two grants and private donations, Ho hired [Sharlyn D. Grace](#) as a staff attorney.

Ho currently splits his time between managing the organization and handling cases. He plans on launching the pro bono attorney aspect of CALA in January or February. An online crowdfunding campaign is also in the works.

“It’s been a very throw-myself-in-the-deep-end-and-hope-I-float, panic-inducing experience,” he said. “But at the same time — very thrilling, an adventure.”

### **Vietnam roots**

CALA board member [Chirag G. Badlani](#), an associate at Hughes, Socol, Piers, Resnick & Dym Ltd., said he was drawn to Ho’s vision for the organization from the moment he first heard about it.

“It’s a decentralized model, in that Lam and the organizations he works with and Sharlyn are essentially a mobile unit,” he said. “They’re able to be flexible in a way that other legal aid organizations are not.”

Being able to give back and provide a voice for the voiceless has been a lifelong goal for Ho.

When he was 6, his family immigrated from Vietnam to Brockton, Mass., an urban, working-class city with a majority-minority population that was plagued with violence.

Ho’s family was on welfare and often ate at soup kitchens. His mother is a survivor of domestic violence, lost all of her life’s savings and, at one point, Ho didn’t see her for years because she had lost custody of her children.

“I knew from a very young age that I wanted to work with people who didn’t have the same rights as everyone else,” he said.

When he went to law school, Ho said, he knew he didn’t want to be an attorney in a big office. He realized he could take his degree and combine it with his passion for working with community groups to make social change.

In 2008, Ho received a Skadden Foundation Public Interest Fellowship and worked for LAF as a staff attorney to open and run 10 neighborhood legal clinics on the West Side.

Ho stayed in Chicago after funding constraints led to the closure of the LAF clinics in 2009, and since then, he’s been looking for a way to bring legal-aid services back into high-poverty neighborhoods.

CALA, Ho said, is the culmination of his life experiences.

“I’m really excited and hopeful, in terms of how much of an impact we can have in Chicago,” he said, “and to introduce the Chicago legal

community to this approach for providing access to justice.”

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